

Rep. Slaughter Leads Rules Debate on Federal Response to Hurricane Katrina

Washington, DC - Rep. Louise M. Slaughter (D-NY), Ranking Member of the House Rules Committee, today led debate on the rule governing H.R. 3673, a bill appropriating more than \$50 billion for relief efforts in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

Rep. Slaughter objected to the fact that the Republican Leadership in Congress has limited total consideration of the bill to 40 minutes, and not allowed any amendments to better address the concerns of many members. She also addressed many of the failures of Federal agencies in their response to the tragedy.

From Rep. Slaughter's Remarks:

This Administration, and this Congress, and the organs of this federal bureaucracy concerned with emergencies like Hurricane Katrina, have a great debt to pay back to the American people.

This Congress owes them more than a mere 40 minutes of consideration on this nation's response to what is quickly becoming the worst natural disaster in American history.

We owe them better than to silence the voice of the American people on this floor.

We owe America better than to intentionally prevent this body from crafting the very best Hurricane recovery legislation it can by refusing to allow any amendments to be offered.

All because this leadership doesn't want to lose a vote, or have their ideas challenged, or suffer the indignity of disagreement in the people's house.

I fear that it is this very mentality, the arrogance of this government, and its unwillingness to allow accountability to be brought into the process, which so deeply contributed to our nation's catastrophic failure on the Gulf Coast.

Rep. Slaughter's Entire Remarks as Prepared:

M. Speaker, The vitally important bill before us today will help to begin the process of rebuilding one of our nation's greatest regions and the lives of the people within it.

It comes to us in the wake of what was last week nothing short of a catastrophic failure of responsible and competent governance.

And not surprisingly, the way in which we are going about passing this bill is itself a tremendous failure - the most recent in a seemingly endless line.

It's a failure, M. Speaker, because almost no time has been provided for discussion of this bill, and because no amendments have been permitted to be introduced.

This body is about to spend more than 50 billion dollars, and all the Minority wants is to spend it wisely.

All we want is to give Members a chance to know where these appropriations are going, and to actually give Representatives from the affected states a chance to make suggestions to this legislation before it becomes law.

We want to ensure that this body will address as quickly as possible, the tremendous errors which have been made by our federal government in its response to Hurricane Katrina.

Last night in the Rules Committee, we implored the Majority to allow even a mere two hours of debate and to allow Members to offer amendments which would make this a better, more effective bill.

Their response? Sorry America, we don't have time for that.

We don't have time?

After five weeks of recess in this chamber, 40 minutes is all the time the United States Congress has to give?

It took our government five days to even respond to this crisis, and we cannot give more than 40 minutes here today to craft a bill that will provide relief and help rebuild an entire region of this country?

We tried to break through, but the Majority wouldn't hear us.

They wouldn't hear us because they didn't want to be challenged, or blamed, or to deal with alternative solutions.

They simply want us to accept their "leadership";, once again, quietly and without comment.

But what the American people want is reform.

They want change.

They want us to work hard here in the House and fix this mess.

And so we won't keep quiet.

Because our nation is demanding that we speak out.

This government failed the people of Louisiana and Mississippi and Alabama.

This government, one so willing to tell other nations and peoples how they should live their lives and organize their states, has revealed itself to be unable to save the lives of its own citizens and to protect its own states when they are in need.

It was unable to meet its most basic responsibility, and the ultimate reason for its very existence: the defense of life within its own borders.

It is obvious that the current Administration and departments in its care didn't have a plan sufficient to handle the kind of crises they were confronted with.

Disturbingly, however, they were armed with a plan for shifting blame away from themselves.

And so, a few days ago, Homeland Security Director Michael Chertoff tried to blame local government officials for what had happened.

Such an argument is embarrassing and shameful.

The federal government had not been adequately supporting those state and local officials in the years leading up to last week, and it did not give them what they needed after Hurricane Katrina struck.

Instead, it neglected them, and then it kicked them when they were down.

These kinds of situations are why FEMA exists. That is why it has been made a part of the Department of Homeland Security, and why 90 billion dollars have been spent on DHS during the past three years.

Do Americans feel any safer? Absolutely not.

There was a tremendous outpouring of help coming from locations around America and the world during the first days of this crisis. But FEMA and Homeland Security were unable to use it constructively.

A thousand firefighters sent from Utah and nearby areas were asked to do “community-relations work” instead of putting out blazes and rescuing children.

Aid and rescue technology offered by more than 90 countries has often been unable to penetrate FEMA's bureaucracy, and has yet to be used.

Wal-Mart sent several trailer-trucks of water to New Orleans early last week, but they were turned back by FEMA officials - they said they didn't need it.

FEMA wouldn't let a nearby Coast Guard ship distribute 1,000 gallons of fuel to people on land.

FEMA cut the emergency communications lines that authorities for Jefferson Parish were using, for who knows what reason.

M. Speaker, this is just the tip of the iceberg.

The tales of failure go on and on and on - failure before Katrina, failure during Katrina, and failure after Katrina.

Ours is a government which has spent much of the last four years focused on national security.

Ours is a government which has spent tens of billions of dollars theoretically preparing our country for impending disasters.

Ours is a government which has justified its hold on power by warning us that only this Administration's leaders could keep Americans safe.

But the administration wasn't up to the task.

Nor was FEMA.

Nor was the Department of Homeland Security.

Our government failed.

Until every aspect of our emergency response system is analyzed and re-evaluated this government will have a hard time finding its credibility in the debris.

And I suggest that we should start trying to regain that credibility right here, today.

This Administration, and this Congress, and the agencies of this federal bureaucracy concerned with emergencies like Hurricane Katrina, have a great debt to pay back to the American people.

This Congress owes them more than a mere 40 minutes of consideration on this nation's response to what is quickly becoming the worst natural disaster in American history.

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I fear that it is this very mentality, the arrogance of this government, and its unwillingness to allow accountability to be brought into the process which so deeply contributed to our nation's catastrophic failure on the Gulf Coast.

We cannot afford to go on like this. Not for even one more day.